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SUBJECT: LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL REACTIONS RELIEVE PRESSURE ON PRO TV

Sensitive But Unclassified. Please Protect Accordingly.

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The Audiovisual Coordinating Council decided on December 19 to extend the broadcasting license of PRO TV and 11 other media outlets to an undetermined date after the upcoming elections. The decision recognized that any action taken against these media would be viewed as political action coloring the electoral campaign. It is clear that this decision was taken in response to pressure from the international community, and demonstrates that Moldovan authorities do value their country's reputation in the West. End summary.

PRO TV and other Licenses Good Until After Elections  
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¶2. (SBU) The nine-member Audiovisual Coordinating Council of Moldova met in a public session on December 19, 2008, to discuss the issue of extension of frequency-broadcasting licenses for 12 broadcasters beyond the licenses' expiration. Although these broadcasters were mostly radio, PRO TV was among them. At the start of the session, Corneliu Mihalache, a Council member, proposed that the broadcasters listed be allowed to continue operating beyond the imminent expiration of their licenses to sometime after the upcoming parliamentary elections. Mihalache said the action was necessary in order to avoid the public portrayal of the ACC as a politically driven regulatory body and to prevent damage to Moldova's international image, especially in view of the upcoming parliamentary elections.

¶2. (SB) Council Chairman Gheorghe Gorincioi then put the following two-part proposal to a vote of the Council: allow all 12 broadcasters to function past their license expiration deadlines; and place a moratorium on competition for the frequencies of the listed broadcasters until sometime after the elections (expected in March or April 2009). With no discussion, both parts of the proposal were adopted by a vote of eight votes in favor and one abstention.

Threat to Withdraw License Provoked Outcry  
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¶3. (SBU) The Audiovisual Council's decision must be understood against the background of events and actions since December 11, when the Council sent a letter to PRO TV, the only remaining major independent television broadcaster in the country, informing it that its license would not be extended. As soon as the ACC letter was made public, there was an immediate outcry, both locally and from the international community. Numerous opposition parties condemned the ACC position as a politically motivated attempt to silence a major independent media outlet on the eve of the upcoming elections. There were also some spontaneous demonstrations in support of PRO TV and against the ACC's publicly expressed position.

¶4. (SBU) On December 12, Council Chairman Gorincioi held a press conference during which he backtracked from the position specified in the letter, stating that PRO TV and other stations whose licenses

expire would have to go through a competition for their frequencies.

Later, speaking on a Pro TV program, Gorincioi said he wanted PRO TV to continue broadcasting unhindered.

¶5. (SBU) Meanwhile, there was an international outcry regarding the PRO TV case. The EU Commissioner for External Relations and the European Neighborhood Policy, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, in a statement on December 12, expressed concern about the ACC position, saying it was "important that the Moldovan authorities respect their international commitments in the field of democracy and human rights, and media freedom, especially in the run-up to the spring 2009 parliamentary elections."

¶6. (SBU) Kalman Miszei, EU Special Representative, met President Voronin on December 18 and delivered a personal message from Xavier Solana, who is responsible for EU Foreign Affairs. (Note: A source said the President had responded that he did not interfere in the ACC's affairs, but that he would not object if the ACC decided to place a moratorium on the frequency competition. End note.) The U.S. Embassy and other Missions requested a meeting with President Voronin to discuss concerns regarding free media. The note requesting the meeting was leaked and published in Moldovan media. In the end, all the noise and pressure seems to have worked, culminating in the ACC decision mentioned above.

Comment: Squeaky Wheels Receive Attention

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¶7. (SBU) Comment: Though it remains to be seen what happens after the elections, the immediate pressure on PRO TV has been lifted. This story demonstrates the extent to which Moldovan authorities value their country's reputation in the West, and the speed with which positive course-corrections can be made. The story also demonstrates to civil society and the Euro-Atlantic community in Chisinau the importance of vigilance, and quick and united action,

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in the face of threats to freedom of information.

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